



PLAN FOUNDATIONS

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Today. Tomorrow. Together.

Guiding Principles

The Plan was developed on a strong foundation of extensive public input that resulted in a vision, set of goals and underlying themes, and on the results of research regarding existing conditions and future trends.

The following “guiding principles” are intended to guide future decision-making and form the foundation upon which the implementation plan was built:

- ▶ Vision statement
- ▶ Key underlying themes
- ▶ Planning goals

A Vision for Acton (Phase I)

- Preserving the rural and historic characteristics
- A sustainable future
- Excellent schools
- Recreational opportunities
- Lively, safe neighborhoods
- Attractive, safe, and walkable shopping areas
- Sidewalks and bike paths
- A Town shuttle
- Open communication and accessible information
- Opportunities for the community to gather
- Vibrant village centers
- Kelley’s Corner as walkable Town center
- Welcoming all its residents

Vision Statement

The following vision statement describes a desired future as articulated by the hundreds of Acton residents who participated in this planning process.

Let us plan so that in the future Acton has retained its uniqueness by preserving its rural and historic characteristics – with ample open fields and meadows, tree-lined roads with meandering sidewalks, ponds, farms, wooded areas, stone walls, and beautiful renovated historic buildings. Imagine a future Acton where growth is managed and developed in keeping with the Town’s character. A town that proactively strives for a sustainable future and where new residents continue to be attracted to: the excellent schools; as well as to a variety of recreational opportunities; welcoming, safe and lively neighborhoods; and attractive, safe, and walkable shopping areas. In addition to sidewalks and bike paths, a town shuttle connects people and places, providing alternatives to automobile travel. Residents are also connected by way of open communication and accessible information, and there are numerous opportunities for the community to gather.

In the future, Acton will have several vibrant village centers – each distinct in its character; and walkable for enjoyable and unique window shopping with locally-owned shops; stores to run to for daily errands and a variety of places to eat; and where you can run into people you know. Envision our ethnic communities enlivening our villages with cultural celebrations, music, and food from their countries of origin. The villages are “quaint but not cute;” they are authentically Acton.

Kelley’s Corner will become a walkable town center. It is vibrant with a wide range of shops and restaurants. Parking, sidewalks, benches, street lighting and signage are all oriented to the pedestrian. Redevelopment is guided by design guidelines and review so that all buildings are lovely and in keeping with Acton’s character.

Acton will continue to welcome all its residents – of all ages, socio-economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds – by providing a variety of housing choices and support services; communicating in multiple languages. Acton will increasingly invite all to contribute to Acton’s civic and social life by creating opportunities for inter-generational experiences and cultural celebrations to be shared and enjoyed by all.

Goals and Objectives

Serving Acton's Goals

The Acton 2020 Plan is based on seven major goals that were developed through listening to nearly 2000 residents. Care has been taken to weave all of them together in a well thought out Implementation Plan. Many of the recommended action steps serve multiple goals. For example, vital centers like the future Kelley's Corner permit more sustainable transportation to be effective, they provide the kinds of gathering places Actonians have asked for, they serve the goal of diversity and inclusion by increasing the stock of less expensive housing, and as analysis of the plan concept shows, they promote fiscal stability.

GOAL 1:

Preserve and Enhance Town Character

- Objective 1.1: Strengthen planning tools to manage growth pro-actively.
- Objective 1.2: Preserve and enhance key centers.
- Objective 1.3: Preserve rural characteristics and open space.
- Objective 1.4: Preserve historic buildings and landscapes.
- Objective 1.5: Foster an understanding and appreciation for what makes Acton unique, including its history.

GOAL 2:

Ensure Environmental Sustainability

- Objective 2.1: Protect the quality and quantity of Acton's water.
- Objective 2.2: Reduce waste and the accumulation of toxins.
- Objective 2.3: Reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.
- Objective 2.4: Move toward patterns of land use and land protection that support broad biodiversity, soil preservation, and healthy local agriculture.

GOAL 3:

Improve Connections

- Objective 3.1: Make walking and biking easier and safer.
- Objective 3.2: Improve transportation around Town.
- Objective 3.3: Promote communication among Town government, citizens, schools, and the business community.
- Objective 3.4: Support and strengthen neighborhoods.

GOAL 4:**Provide More Opportunities for Community Gathering and Recreation**

- Objective 4.1: Create new gathering spaces and make better use of existing ones.
- Objective 4.2: Provide more playgrounds, fields for team sports, parks, and conservation lands.
- Objective 4.3: Support additional cultural activities.

GOAL 5:**Support Inclusion and Diversity**

- Objective 5.1: Support residents of all ages.
- Objective 5.2: Support households of all income levels.
- Objective 5.3: Embrace cultural diversity.
- Objective 5.4: Support citizens with disabilities in participating fully in the life of the community.

GOAL 6:**Preserve and Enhance Town-Owned Assets & Services**

- Objective 6.1: Protect Town-owned open space.
- Objective 6.2: Support excellence in schools.
- Objective 6.3: Manage the Town's facilities efficiently.
- Objective 6.4: Provide high quality services that are responsive to community needs.
- Objective 6.5: Provide excellent public health and safety services.

GOAL 7:**Maintain and Improve the Financial Well-Being of the Town**

- Objective 7.1: Promote fiscal responsibility.
- Objective 7.2: Promote economic development that supports other Acton 2020 planning goals.
- Objective 7.3: Improve existing commercial areas.
- Objective 7.4: Support the financial ability of all residents to stay in Acton for a lifetime.

Underlying Themes:

An increased 'sense of community'

- **Community Gathering:** desire for indoor and outdoor places and events to meet and interact casually, spontaneously as well as in a planned, more formal fashion.
- **Town Character:** desire to preserve and enhance features – physical and other – including a commitment to excellence in education, rural and historic characteristics, including the preservation of open space and the small town feeling, which make Acton unique and contribute to its sense of community.
- **Connectivity:** desire for walking, biking, public transportation; traffic calming and improvements; increased opportunities for social networks and connections.

The 'future resilience' of the Town

- **Environmental Sustainability:** concern regarding our ability to ensure the future health and well-being of our environment.
- **Social and Economic Diversity:** concern regarding ability to accommodate a range of socio-economic levels as well as the ability to age in place.
- **Financial Viability:** concern regarding the ability of the Town to protect its assets and maintain a viable balance between taxes and services provided.

What Makes Acton Unique?

One of the objectives of a Comprehensive Community Plan is to identify those features that make a community special and are treasured by its residents; and to protect the particular "sense of place" that makes a community unique and distinct from other communities. It is part of the role of a Comprehensive Community Plan to define these themes and identify measures and means by which to preserve and enhance them. These need to be taken into account when determining how to manage growth and mitigate related impacts.

Residents were asked several times and in a variety of ways to identify the features that make Acton unique. This is some of what they said:

- *"excellent schools, community commitment to education"*
- *"small town, close to Boston"*
- *"Not Your Average Wonderbread Town"*
- *"semi-rural/town and country suburb"*
- *"peaceful, quiet, family-oriented, friendly, safe, socially aware, livable"*
- *"location, access"*
- *"seasonal changes, stone walls, foliage, picturesque, old barns"*
- *"good value"*
- *"sense of community, small town feeling, run into people you know"*
- *"history and historic New England architecture"*
- *"train"*
- *"degree of volunteerism"*
- *"village centers"*
- *"open space and recreation"*
- *"culturally diverse, accepting, welcoming"*
- *"good balance between nature and development"*
- *"high achieving, driven, ambitious"*
- *"community events"*
- *"charm, atmosphere"*
- *"its bucolic beginnings"*
- *"a great safe place to raise a family"*
- *"wonderful woodland trails"*
- *"the presence of the past"*

Outreach - Acton Voices

Outreach Highlights: Acton Voices from Phase I¹

Phase I of the Plan involved intensive and extensive outreach to a wide range of residents, business owners and town officials. The intention was to understand what Actonians most appreciated about their Town and to identify what they perceive as the most important future challenges. The Comprehensive Community Plan addresses these issues in the proposed **Roadmap** and Implementation Plan.

► Most important assets

- Schools
- Open space, conservation land, natural features
- Historic buildings/landscapes
- Town character (including rural and historic characteristics)

Also: sense of community, easy access/location, commuter rail, small town feel

► Priority challenges

- Need to control growth and development
- Need to plan for sustainability
- High cost of living (incl. taxes)
- Lack of transportation options (incl. walking/biking)
- Traffic

Also: lack of adequate opportunities for casual social interaction, Town government issues, erosion of Town character

► If you could do one thing to make Acton a better place what would it be²?

- Make pedestrian and bike-friendly
- Develop a sustainability plan
- Expand the commercial tax base
- Make traffic improvements
- Control development
- Protect and acquire open space
- Provide public transportation

► If you could do one thing to make Acton a better place for teens what would it be³?

- Movie theater
- Sidewalks

Also: a club for older kids, another park, plan for sustainability, provide public transportation, more restaurants, swimming pool, amusement park

► What are your least favorite things about Acton that you feel are important to change⁴?

- Traffic
- Lack of walkability
- No real Town center
- Affordability (including housing)
- Lack of adequate site review, subdivision and design review
- Kelley's Corner
- Biking and walking not safe
- Lack of growth management
- Poorly designed commercial areas
- Improvements needed at train station
- Lack of variety in places to go

¹ See Volume II (Phase 1) for a detailed documentation of public input.

² From Visioning Workshop 1 (March 29, 2008)

³ From high school survey

⁴ From Visioning Workshop 1 (March 29, 2008)

Outreach Highlights: Acton Voices from Phase II⁵

Phase II continued the extensive outreach to Acton residents, business owners, and Town officials. Acton 2020 provided multiple opportunities for public input and focused on specific questions; top responses to key questions are listed below.

► If you could do one thing to address economic development issues in Acton what would it be⁶?

- Space for solo-preneurs
- Village infill development
- Create a land development corporation
- Kelley's Corner

► If you could do one thing to address housing issues in Acton what would it be⁷?

- Mixed use pedestrian village
- Sewers to villages
- Increase density
- Lower property tax
- Mandatory design review

► If you could do one thing to address transportation issues in Acton what would it be⁸?

- More sidewalks
- Fixed route bus

- Finish Bruce Freeman Trail
- Kelley's Corner redesign
- Create bike lanes and paths

► Which scenario do you prefer to help guide growth and development in the future⁹?

The large majority of participants preferred the scenario that guided growth to the villages, developed Kelley's Corner into a Town center, and preserved open space. What people seemed to appreciate most about this alternative:

- Villages with places to go and opportunities to gather and mingle, including opportunities for more theater and music
- Energy savings due to walkability
- Protection of open space in outer areas
- Efficient use of infrastructure

Also wanted to focus on: employment oriented development, limiting growth to protect rural characteristics, preservation of historic character and sidewalk/bikeway and public transportation improvement, among other things.

► Which center should we focus on first: Kelley's Corner or West Acton or other¹⁰?

Most participants felt that the Town should focus on Kelly's Corner first; some felt that West Acton has more potential and should receive attention first.

► How can the Town of Acton and the residents of Acton start preparing now for what might happen if oil and other fossil fuel products become much more scarce and expensive over the next 20 years?

Participants offered a range of recommendations including exploring alternative sources of energy, tracking the carbon footprint and planning for local capacity in terms of energy, water, food, etc. Most comments made connections between land use, planning and sustainability by focusing on mixed-use development, sidewalks, local shopping options walkable from neighborhoods, improvements to biking, clustering housing, and supporting employment oriented businesses.

⁵ See Volume II (Phase II) for a detailed documentation of public input.

⁶ From "Burning Issues" public workshop, March 3, 2011

⁷ From "Burning Issues" public workshop, March 12, 2011

⁸ From "Burning Issues" public workshop, March 9, 2011

⁹ From "Choose Your Own Acton" public workshop, June 23, 2011

¹⁰ From "How Do We Get There?" public meeting, Nov.9, 2011



Key Opportunities and Challenges

Phase II of the Plan began with extensive re-research on all aspects of the Town, from natural resources to services and facilities; highlights of this research is presented in the next-to-last section of Volume I, and the full inventory report is in Volume II.

From this research several key opportunities and challenges stand out. (More detail is provided in those sections of this report.)

External

External forces pose the challenges of a slow economy, rising gas prices, and climate change, so it will take longer to realize desired commercial development, and the Plan should aim at enabling less driving and reducing Acton's carbon footprint.

At the same time, there are opportunities in changing public attitudes about the need for sustainability and the desire for alternatives to driving. Additionally, there has been a recent shift

in the demand in residential markets from large, single-family houses to smaller units in walkable neighborhoods that are fiscally beneficial.

Internal

Slower growth during the economic downturn is a challenge, because growth in commercial uses is needed to increase the tax base for fiscal stability. However, the downturn is also an opportunity to prepare for the future and to plan for additional residential and commercial uses, their desired type and location.



Future school enrollments are projected to gradually decline as demographics change.

Acton's population will include more seniors, and school enrollments will gradually decline, improving fiscal capacity.



Stormwater management will be an ongoing concern.

Acton's natural resources, especially water, are currently in good condition for the most part, but keeping them that way will require continued vigilance: managing wastewater and stormwater, and monitoring groundwater quantity and quality.



Acton's transportation system depends heavily on the automobile, as in most towns in the area.

Transportation poses both challenges and opportunities. Despite the desire for alternative transportation, Acton is still highly auto-dependent, but there are many opportunities to promote and accommodate walking, cycling, and public transportation.



The current Senior Center is too small and not designed to fully serve Acton's growing senior population.

Town facilities are in good condition and, except for the Senior Center, adequate for the future. A new building that serves seniors and the wider community would respond to this challenge. More study is needed of how best to provide emergency services to the north side of Town.

Future Contingencies

A Comprehensive Plan should be resilient – it should continue to be a guide even if the unpredictable happens. The “**wild cards**” that Acton might have to face include:

- Prolonged economic downturn combined with escalating cost of healthcare and other post-employment benefits.
- Energy costs rise even more sharply than in recent years.
- Weather events such as more frequent and more violent storms and significant climate changes.
- School enrollments that don’t decline as expected.
- Revival of the housing market leading to a major residential subdivision proposed for a large tract of land.



There is also the risk that things don’t turn out as anticipated, e.g., more or less development pressure, tighter budgets, or unforeseen infrastructure needs.

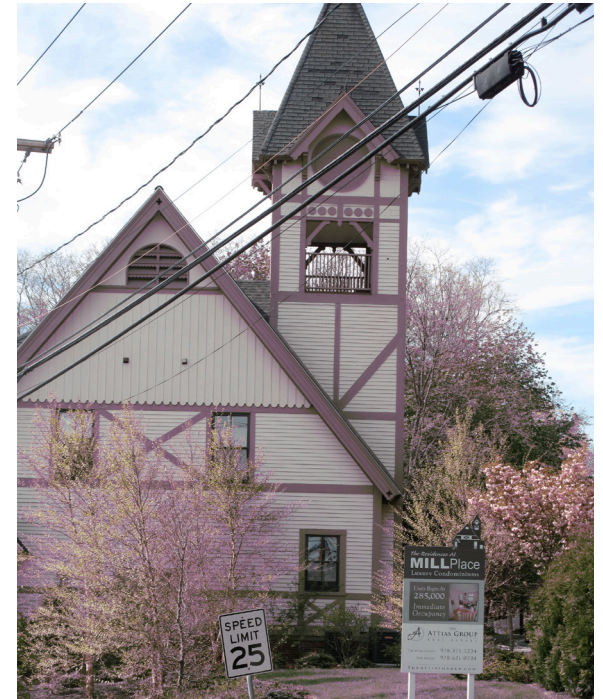
The 2020 Plan has resilience in the face of such unexpected trends and events.

By guiding growth to the centers and protecting open space through transfer of development rights, the development of a large tract of land with consequent increases in school and other costs, can potentially be channeled into compact mixed use development with smaller units that generate less school cost and pay more taxes than their cost to service.

By emphasizing employment-oriented economic development, the most promising source of added tax revenue, Acton can do better than similar towns that don’t invest in attracting commercial growth, even in a prolonged downturn.

By moving to more sustainable land use patterns, alternatives to the automobile become more feasible, reinforcing these patterns and enabling people to reduce their energy costs.

By calling for appropriate guidelines and more rigorous review of development in the centers, particularly Kelley’s Corner where sewers are already in place, the Town’s water supply can



be better protected from wastewater impacts, largely funded by new development. A key recommendation is a study of each center to develop place-specific design guidelines and evaluate potential impacts due to traffic, wastewater disposal, and stormwater management.

And if Town finances constrain desired improvements, the phasing of major investments can be adjusted to correspond to available resources. (See page 46.)

Did You Know?

Extensive research was done by the consultant team and by the 2020 Committee and additional information was contributed by some members of the public.

The “snapshot” on this page is largely drawn from the Inventory Report, which is summarized in the next-to-last section of this volume and presented in full in Volume II.

Housing and Population

- Acton’s 2010 U.S. Census population was 21,924, up 8% since 2000.
- The percent of residents 65 and older is expected to nearly double over the next 20 years from less than 10% to over 18%.
- Over the same period the number of school-age children is expected to decline slightly even while the total population increases.
- Acton had 8,187 housing units in 2010, up 9% from 2000. 63% are single family houses.
- Projections by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council suggested that, based on current zoning, population will increase by 10% by 2030 and housing units will increase by 1000 units or 12%.

Schools and School Enrollments

- In 2010 there were 218 students (K-12) per 1,000 population, the third highest of the towns Acton touches.
- Acton Public Schools spent \$11,246 per pupil in 2009-2010, the second lowest of the towns it touches¹.
- Acton-Boxborough Regional High School, was named a Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education in 2009

Land Use

- Acton’s land area is approximately 13,000 acres (20 square miles).
- 29% of Acton’s land area is open space (lower than five of the towns it touches). Roughly 1/3 of this open space is not protected from development.
- There are about 2,200 acres of developable land (vacant and not wetland).
- Based on 2008 land use data, approximately 1,800 additional housing units could be built on land now zoned residential, bringing the total at build-out² to 10,300, or 22% more than today. This would take more than 30 years at projected growth rates.

¹ These are Boxborough, Carlisle, Concord, Littleton, Maynard, Stow, Sudbury, and Westford.

² “Build-out” occurs when all buildable land has been fully developed.

Water and Wastewater

- All of Acton’s public water supply comes from groundwater wells.
- Water demand has been relatively constant over the past six years, approximately 600 million gallons per year (MGY), reflecting water conservation efforts. Acton’s state permit allows up to 708.1 MGY.
- Residential water demand is estimated by Acton Water District to be roughly 55 gallons per bedroom per day, substantially lower than the norm of 70.
- 80% of Acton’s homes have on-site septic systems, a high ratio for a town of Acton’s population. The other 20 percent use sewers or package treatment to dispose of wastewater.

And...

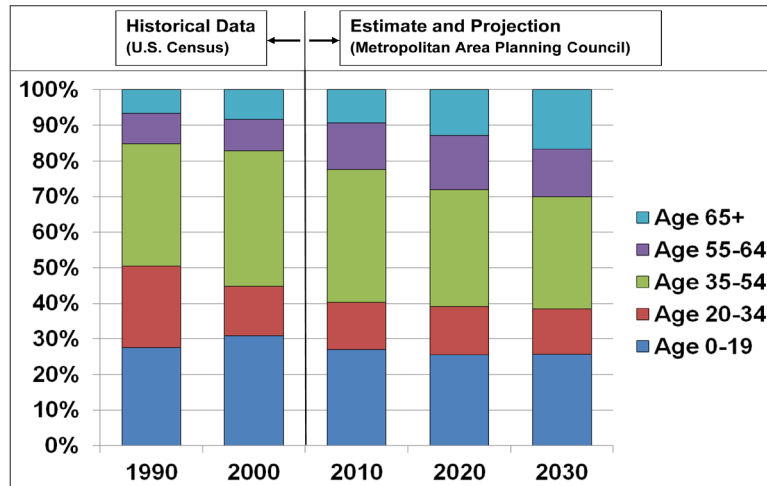
- The average household in Acton drives 76 miles per day, the lowest of the adjacent towns except Concord.
- 87.5% of Town revenues come from residential property, in the middle of the group of towns it touches.
- Acton was named the 16th Best Place To Live among small towns in the country by Money Magazine in 2009 and in 2011

The charts on the following two pages provide a graphic illustration of demographic projections and a comparison between Acton and surrounding towns on a number of relevant factors including multi-family housing, school children, and taxes.

Percentage of Population Age Groups

Seniors 65+ and "empty nesters" 55-64 are projected to increase as proportion of the total population, while the proportion of children will decrease.

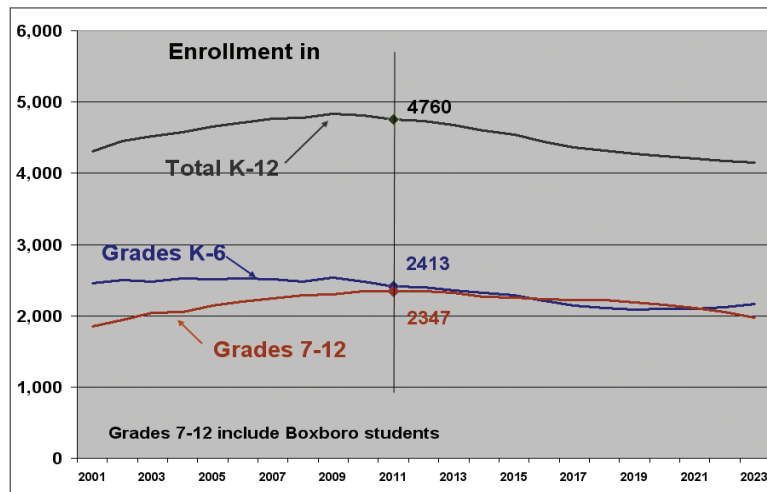
Demographic Change



Historic and Projected School Enrollments

Enrollments reached a peak in 2009, and demographic changes are projected to cause a steady decline even as the Town grows.

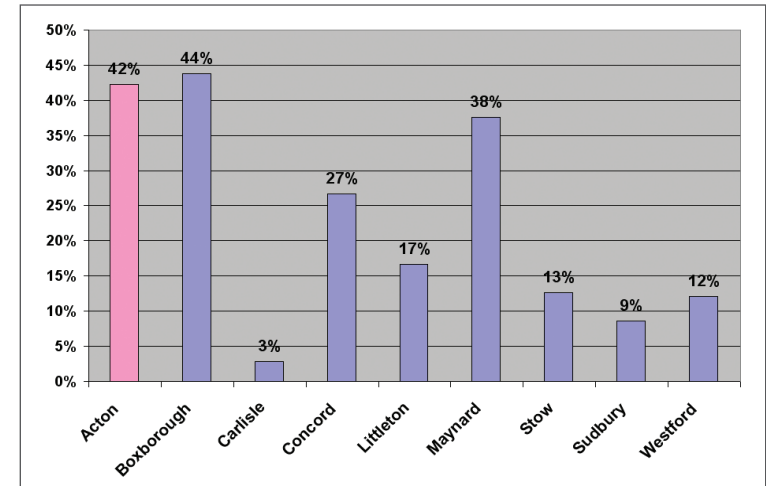
School Enrollment



Percent of Housing in 2+ unit Buildings

Acton has a higher percentage of housing with two or more units in a building than six of the adjacent towns, but is in the same range as Boxborough and Maynard.

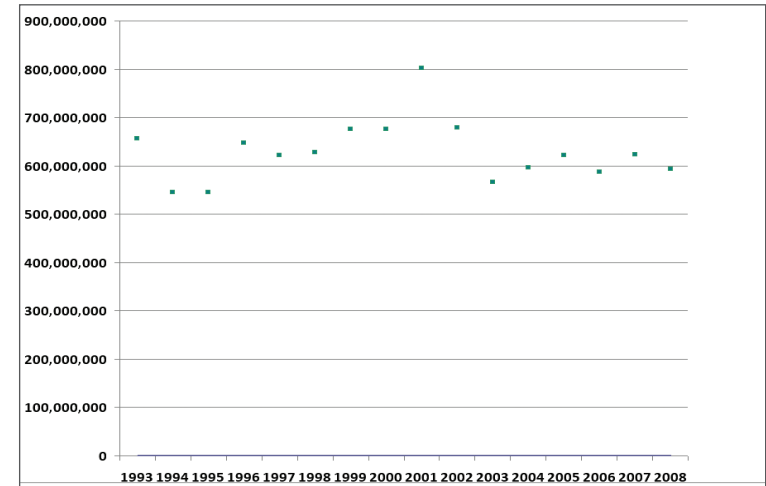
Multi-Family Housing



Water Supplied by Acton Water District, 1993-2009, Gal. per year

Due to conservation efforts promoted by AWD, there has been little growth in water use since 2002.

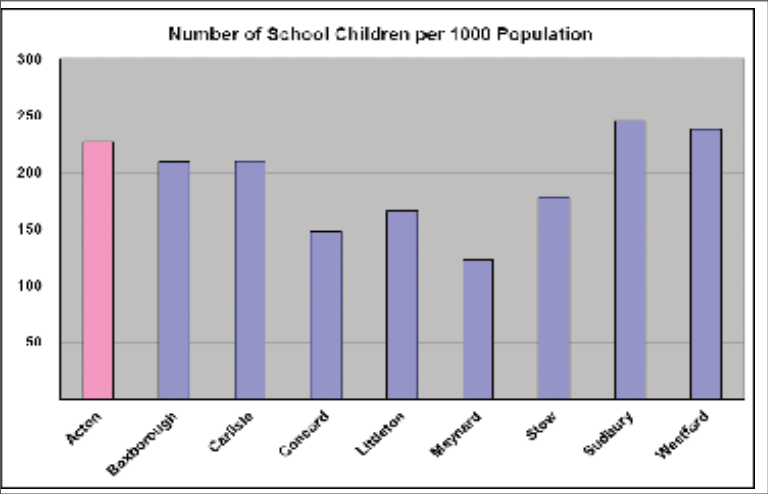
Water Use



School Children

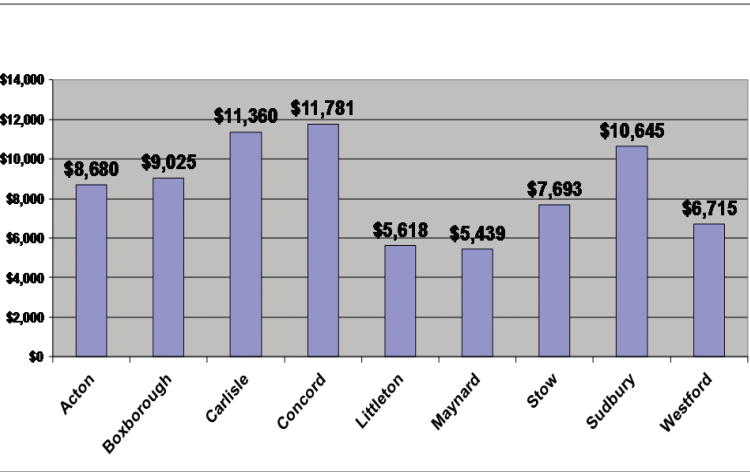
Ratio of School Children to Total Population, 2010

Acton had 2018 school children per 1,000 population in 2010, which is in the middle of the adjacent towns, but still relatively high on a statewide basis, putting pressure on the Town budget.



Average Single Family Home Tax Bill, 2010

Acton has a high tax rate, but the average tax on a single family house is lower than four other adjacent towns with lower tax rates but more expensive houses.

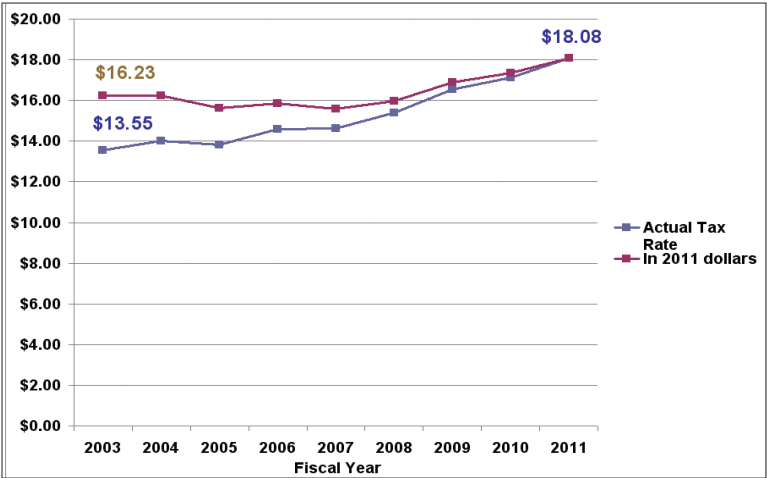


Tax Bill

Tax Rate Changes

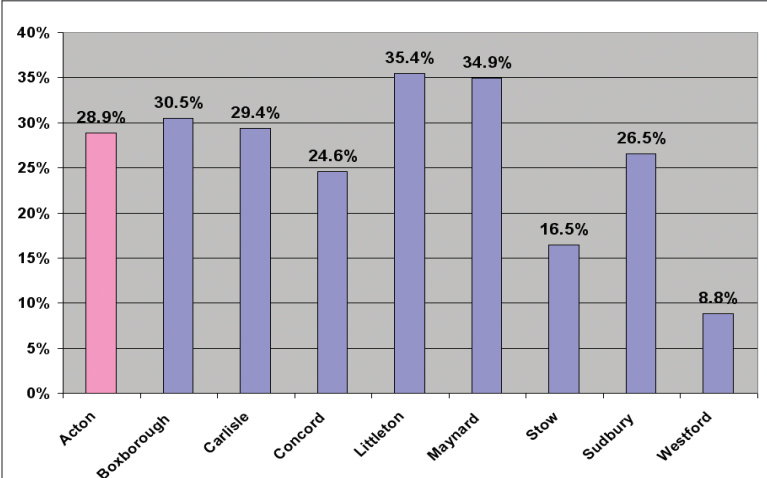
Acton's Tax Rate FY2003-2011

The property tax rate increased 33.4% from FY 2003 to FY 2011 or 4.2% year; however when inflation is taken into account, the real increase was 1.4% per year. (Source: Massachusetts Dept. of Revenue and U.S. Dept of Commerce Consumer Price Index for Boston).



Percent Increase in the Tax rate 2004-2011

Taxes have increased everywhere during the past eight years, but the increase in Acton was less than in four of the adjacent towns.



Tax Increase

